

Getting it wrong – again

Nostalgic view of flight apron at the Air Force Academy, Dundigal before the Harvards were phased out. The flying training sequence then (HT-2/Harvard/Vampire) was never satisfactorily supplanted, although the HPT-32/HJT-16/Hunter sequence was adopted till the latter type was retired and its successor the Hawk inducted two decades late.

AFA Sans BTA

Indian magazines on defence preparedness, weapon acquisitions, financial allocations for Armed Forces, joint ventures with global manufacturers, mislead readers into believing that India's defence production is strong, reliable, contemporary, and robust. Exhortations of Private – Public partnerships to invest in defence related industry abound, with promises of level playing grounds and fair deals. No hints of impediments by disingenuous bureaucratic wrangles, legal inventiveness with loads of political inertia and greed.

So what's the problem one may ask? It happens all over the world. How is India different? Manoeuvring the techno-commercial maze, negotiating bureaucratic-legal hassles, confronting political hazards, is a part of the game, and has been for years, how can it change? Question is not that should it change, but why is it not changing? India's Armed Forces have always been getting the short end of the stick; it is time to get what we need. India's defence production base is weak, unreliable and redundant without visible remedial action. This is well known to those involved in production and procurements, and more so to the

Armed Forces as also the Police and Para-Military. To reiterate a cliché, a bewildered BSF cop asks, "Why do I get a rifle that stops more often than it fires". He refers to the Insas. This is our true state and the tragic CRPF engagement at Dantewada is evidence.

The scene is no different in the military aviation arena, where we do not even have a basic trainer for the IAF. Can there be any excuse for this shameful situation? A nation that boasts of an enviable technical manpower, cannot give its own Air Force the capability to train pilots for defending Indian skies? The HPT-32 hurt us enough and its replacement could have been the designated HTT-34. For some unusual reason, the HTT-34 was evaluated against turbo trainers in the class of the Tucano/Texan II, making it virtually impossible to accept. Have we forgotten the dictum that no man should do to others that which is repugnant to himself? One friend suggested that we should have evaluated the HTT-34 against the MiG-29 if we had decided to reject it before the evaluation! But that story may never see light of day even with the RTI. So what do we do? Is it our inability to do it right, or our proclivity to do it wrong?

So why no Basic Trainer at the Air Force Academy?

How do we explain this blunder to our youth, to the tax paying public who have sacrificed much for maintaining the IAF? Should we have reached this road-block? We saw it coming and if that be so, who neglected to make enough noise for remedial action? Can all the agencies involved in providing the basic trainer honestly say that they did everything possible to avoid this impasse? There are people and organisations who displayed culpable, careless and wilful negligence. The non-availability of a trainer aircraft did not just happen, it has been brought about. Who did this? How come governmental institutions, checks & balances, auditors, Parliament Committees, Defence HQs, the MOD, PMO, and the all powerful print and electronic media, let this happen? What about our sole aircraft manufacturer HAL and other aeronautical research establishments working with HAL where has their attention been riveted? What about NAL, which makes aeroplanes no one wants, why did they not make a trainer instead of the abdicable Saras? What's worse, NAL now wants to make an ambitions regional airliner! The HPT-32's

Lycoming engine powers many other aircraft types under comparable temperature, humidity, dusty conditions as exist at Air Force Academy, Dundigal. Those Lycoming engines are not failing with regularity as ours do. Has this anomaly been adequately investigated? Are we doing something wrong? Is it our inability to do it right? Are we hiding something? Have we asked unbiased and non-partisan experts to study our methods? If maintenance by the IAF is incorrect, who is to remedy this? What about the mixture lever? Why should it be locked at 'fully rich'? Did we not fly the T-6G Harvard and adjust the mixture?

A parachute to bring down the HPT-32!

It is rumoured, hopefully it remains thus, that a modification is planned to retrofit a parachute onto the HPT-32, for should the engine die, then that parachute would be deployed to bring it down safely? Sounds wonderful, especially for those not flying the HPT-32. Has enough thought been given to the psychological wallop on instructor and pupil? What do instructors tell cadets about this clumsy parachute which will bring them down, but not back? And pray how does the pilot guide that parachute so that it touches down vertically without drift, twist or wobble? What are the survivability data of crew when this amazing procedure concludes? And, what are the aerobatic, spin, stall characteristics with the parachute? Will we teach our boys only circuits and landings? Once again is it our proclivity to do it wrong? And when we do it wrong, and lose people in that wrongdoing, who will be accountable?

Most, who approve this horrendous modification will be unavailable for investigations. Eventually someone sufficiently inclined will conduct an enquiry and apportion blame on the inanimate parachute, its raisers, and strong winds in the Deccan. Reminds one of the abrupt change of presiding officer inquiring into the crash of the HS-748 AWACS at Arkonam. Who got blamed for that awful calamity? Surely blame was due? Who will get blamed for the equally tragic Saras crash? We want to continue flying the HPT-32, but knowing that the engine will die, more often than not, we slap on a parachute for a whole

aircraft. Which other Air Force in this universe trains its pilots this way? Are we unwilling to do it right, are determined to do it wrong, have we no solution?

Before we move onto whether we could have got a basic trainer in time, let's apportion blame on all those who deserve it. *Vayu* readers will have a rather long list. One guilty party is the system of selecting, short-listing, tendering, negotiating, and finally procuring. So who makes the system? Get that guy, he is the bureaucrat. Punishment for bureaucrats / technocrats is rare. The Military Secretary of the Indian Army gets the sack for a Sukhna scam. Which technocrat / bureaucrat has been punished for the innumerable scams they created including that of no trainer aircraft? Voltaire preached, "Harsh retribution serves not only to punish the culprit, but also encourages others to remain virtuous". Harshness is meted out only to military men, never to *babudom*. *Kya baat hai?*

We have the wherewithal to get trainers

India has been flush with foreign exchange for years, the HPT-32 has been troubling us for years, and alternate base trainer aircraft have been available for many years, yet we have not procured them! It is inconceivable that the Air Force Academy and IAF Training Command did not demand replacements because HPT-32 engine failures have persistently delayed training schedules. Which trainer and at what cost is outside the purview of this story. The truth is that trainers, piston or turboprop, have been available, but the MOD has not shown the earnestness to get them. Surely, blame in some form or another, must also reside with the IAF.

If MOD can be so swift in asking Chiefs of Staff to not make remarks about certain issues, then what prevents the same MOD from making sure that the Chiefs quickly make up their minds on what they want? But after a Chief decides, the *babu* takes over (along with his political patrons), and thereby hangs the tale of long delayed defence procurements. What a mess this is and all the while we have had the financial resources, technical expertise, pilots / engineers readily available to initiate processes for inducting trainer aircraft. It was no secret that the HPT-32 must be replaced sooner than

later, whatever be the cause, yet we refuse to do it right. The Air Force Academy must continue training pilots with whatever is available, but is this the most efficient and cost effective method of building and sustaining the 4th largest Air Force in the world? What image are we presenting before the USA, Russia, Europe, Middle East, South East Asia, and our neighbours? What confidence do we inspire among the knowledgeable population of India? We have everything readily available to procure or manufacture a basic trainer for the IAF, but we do not do it. Is this not a clear demonstration of our proclivity to keep doing it wrong? Designers, manufacturers and their controllers must be accountable.

Change the guard and get a new balloon

In an earlier article by the author, it was suggested that PSUs and the DRDO must be made accountable for their uncontrolled blunders. General VP Malik, former COAS was forced to ask his army to fight in Kargil "with whatever we have". Many criticised him for saying so, but what did the critics expect him to say? That unless the troops get latest equipment demanded years back, we will wait and let the enemy come further into India? The military commander does his job with what he has at the time the battle is joined. Then Air Marshal Arjan Singh did not wait for new aircraft in September 1965, he fought with Vampires, Mysteres, Hunters and Gnats. At the end of the battle, the military commander is judged by his peers and juniors who fought for him. When will India assess the PSUs and DRDO laboratories along with their controlling bureaucrats and political masters?

It has been very strongly suggested by technocrats, academics, visionaries, military leaders, corporate captains and informed journalists that private enterprise must get a stake in Defence Industries, and only then can India hope to get her beleaguered aircraft industry moving at the pace required. HAL and its associated R&D units have failed the IAF (and India) again and again. One LCA and an ALH in 30 years is not good enough. If the aircraft design and manufacturing conglomerate is incapable of delivering a basic trainer, let's find some other who can. Let not egos or *ahankara* decide such strategic

policy. The industry needs a fresh breath of exhilarating helium to take it to the heights demanded by an India that needs to address her military aviation needs of the 21st Century.

We have supported our aviation industry without justifiable returns only because it needed “time to mature”. But, by any standards, 60 years is a long time to mature. Because we are more concerned and anxious about how the aviation industry is perceived, and not how it functions, we showered it with independent time and funds. Perhaps this matters because the aviation industry is uncertain of its perceived worth, if and outsiders show complete disinterest in their ventures, it will disappear. Maybe the time has come to tell the truth without hemming and hawing. As Michelangelo is supposed to have told Pope Julius II while painting the Sistine Chapel, ‘*If the wine is sour, throw it out*’. Is it time for the Air Force to do something similar?

“Keep the private players out”; that is paramount

Even if the Air Force coerces remedial processes, somebody other than the IAF has to implement that remedy and therein lies the crunch. Because those ‘somebody’s’ are the very ones who must first be charged, as sour wine causes more acidity than intoxication. Who or what group of dedicated visionaries with adequate clout can initiate the change? If the IAF / Navy/ Army get what they need, when they want it, their support will be unflinching. The last 50 years are evident of that support as India’s Armed Forces have a stake in nurturing a domestic aviation industry that surges with pride at delivering what the *fauji* needs, not what he has to take. The tragicomic Saras case of NAL illustrates this dilemma, along with Arjun, Insas, Indra, and more. Keeping private companies out of the game is the primary aim because far too many skeletons will then tumble out. Witness the report that only BEL and HAL are receiving orders for UAVs. It would be grossly inconvenient to have Tatas, M&M, L&T, Bharat Forge and similar corporate

successes involved with the UAV project. The private sector is taboo. Look at what the Chairman Medical Council of India is alleged to have done. It is inconceivable that those who should have prevented it were ignorant about his infringements! That is exactly what has happened about the Basic Trainer Aircraft for the IAF. The MOD knew all along that something terrible was amiss and very soon the Air Force Academy will be crippled without such trainers. ‘What Me Worry’! is the attitude of India’s aviation industry which has now grounded military aviation training, and achieved this without a shot being fired by our adversary. No one is to blame? No dismissals? No questions in parliament? No scientist of eminence castigating the system for this criminal failure? No solution except slapping a parachute onto the HPT-32! Blame flying from one to another, like Duryodhan blaming Dronacharya for Pandavas being great warriors. When intentions are flawed, and dedication is fictitious, one will cast blame on others.

The absence of basic trainers is an unenviable position for any Air Force. From 150 trainers, there now are none. Which organisation is responsible for this? The bureaucrat / technocrats will say that the IAF does not make up its mind. If the *babu* can certainly force the Chiefs of Armed Forces to desist from making

comments on various issues, then they can force the Chief of Air Staff to choose the Basic trainer. The politico-bureaucratic combine lacks the knowledge and courage to take matters in hand and do what must be done. Without courage there cannot be truth; and without truth there can be no other virtue. The civilians who control everything, but are ill-equipped and unwilling, fail to understand that “War to the soldier is a trade; to the officer it is a profession, to the general it is an art”, as stated by Napoleon Bonaparte. Conducting flying training for military pilots is an art for the Air Marshal. The treatment meted out by HAL to the Armed Forces is shameful, evidenced by the absence of basic trainers today at our Academy. While the Air Force Chief will find a solution to keep his forces airborne, the criticality and risks imposed upon the IAF does not seem to worry any technocrat/ bureaucrat/politician. Without swift punishment to those who have brought this peril upon India, nothing will change. If IPL can survive without Lalit Modi, if Foreign Affairs can survive without Shashi Tharoor, if Satyam can survive without Ramalinga Raju, if CPI (M) can survive without Somnath Chatterjee, our aviation industry and R&D organisations can also survive without HAL and DRDO.

Gp Capt Anant G. Bewoor (retd.)



Spot the change: In the late 1940s, the IAF received HAL licence-built Percival Prentice basic trainer (below) which were in turn replaced by HT-2s. 40 years later, the IAF replaced its HT-2s with the HPT-32 (left) for basic flying training. In 2010, with the HPT-32s grounded, the IAF is being forced to import basic trainers even as HAL endeavours to design the HTT-40.

